Umbrella
Supplement 0.6

The National Park System: An Overview

Today there are more than 380 areas in the National Park System covering more than 83 million acres in every state except Delaware. Units are also found in the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. These areas include national parks, monuments, battlefields, military parks, historical parks, historic sites, lakeshores, seashores, scenic rivers and trails, recreation areas and the White House.

Units of the National Park System may be created in one of two ways – an Act of Congress or a Presidential Proclamation. When Congress creates an addition to the National Park System, it determines the name and designation for each area and makes reference to the general concepts under which it will be managed. Sometimes Congress is very specific about management terms; sometimes Congress simply refers to the 1916 National Park Service Act.

Proposals for additions to the National Park System may come from public, state and local officials, Indian tribes, members of Congress or the National Park Service. To be eligible for favorable consideration as a unit of the National Park System, an area must possess nationally significant natural, cultural or recreational resources; be a suitable and feasible addition to the system; and require direct National Park Service management instead of protection by some other governmental agency or by the private sector.

The areas in the system represent the nation's greatest natural and cultural places and recreational areas of outstanding attraction. All units have resources and values that make them special and nationally significant.

The basic premise that has long distinguished national parks from other federal lands is that of preservation versus conservation. Most federal lands, such as national forests (Department of Agriculture), are managed for a variety of purposes including timber, minerals, water, power and recreation, with a management goal to provide the greatest good for the greatest number of people. National parklands set aside for their natural significance constitute a tiny fraction of the public domain. They are set aside to preserve a few undisturbed samples of natural America so that we can enjoy them and learn from them. The product is much less tangible – and less economically quantifiable – than the products of the multiple-use lands. In its purest form, the idea is appealing: The resource is naturalness, or wildness. And if it were this simple, management would entail nothing more than leaving the place alone.

But it's not that simple. Parks are not ecological islands, even the largest of them. Exotic fauna and flora move into the park, and native fauna and flora move out onto lands with other legislative mandates. Also, the National Park Service mandate

requires that people be able to move about in the parks as well, and their migration routes become paved and buildings appear near them. Very quickly the challenge to use and yet preserve becomes overwhelming.

Park managers must forever struggle with this dual mandate to both preserve and use, and the challenge becomes increasingly difficult as more people desire to visit parks. As the value of wild places becomes increasingly clear, we are struggling to decide, with limited resources, just what can and should be saved.

More so than ever before, the National Park Service realizes that its fundamental mission is focused not only on national parks but also on a national system made up of resources managed by states, federal agencies, local governments and the private sector. It works with many partners in the public and private sectors to sustain and preserve this national system of natural and cultural resources and outdoor recreational opportunities. These resources, together with national parks, provide all citizens access to the richness and diversity of our national heritage.